

Chairman Brenner, Madame Ranking Member and Members of the Education and Career Readiness Committee:

My name is Sally Dyer. I live in Dayton. I have devoted most of my adult life to advocating for and acting on issues impacting the health and safety of Ohio children. With permission, I submit for the record a list of my child advocacy related experiences, along with a written copy of my testimony.

I know I am here today among friends as I speak in support of adopting HB 377. On a bipartisan basis, the House passed a similar version of this bill by a wide margin in the last session only to see it die in the Senate Education Committee.

You have already heard many of the statistics so I summarize only a few here now. A 2005 Center for Disease Control report estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of eighteen. In the same report, approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. Furthermore, “disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; children often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood.”¹

These statistics are shocking. But childhood sexual abuse is always secretive by nature and children are often warned against or threatened about exposing the secret. So sadly, the reported statistics in this area are widely acknowledged as underreported. ²

But more importantly, every paper statistic has a human story behind each of the numbers. I come to you today as a living statistic. I am a survivor of childhood incest. I tell my story to illustrate the importance of passing Erin’s Law so that unlike me, other Ohio children will feel empowered to promptly come forward to report and stop the abuse and then get the help they need as soon as possible.

I grew up in an affluent Cincinnati neighborhood, the middle child in a family of 6 children. I was molested from the age of 7 -12 years old by my oldest brother. I kept my secret for more than 14 years, afraid to tell anyone, first under threats from my brother that no one would believe me, and later out of shame and the false belief that I had survived the abuse unscathed.

In the early 1980’s when I worked as the Coordinator for the Child Abuse Review and Evaluation Team at Children’s Medical Center in Dayton, our team attended an all day workshop

¹Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

² The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet, April 2009

on incest. It was there that I first heard the alarming statistics on incest. I remember sitting there thinking, 'they are talking about me, but I'm OK.' That false sense of being OK was shattered when I began experiencing flashbacks a couple of years later. I finally told my secret to my best friend, my husband. I was 26 years old. With his encouragement, I persisted over the course of 12 years and 5 different therapists to come to terms with the abuse and to heal. I have no doubt today that the abuse I experienced would have stopped sooner and my path to healing would have been so much easier if I had felt safe to disclose my secret to one of my favorite teachers in elementary or middle school.

My youngest sister was also a statistic. At age 43, she disclosed to her therapist that she had been sexually abused starting at the age of 5. By that time she had suffered serious mental health problems for most of her life, including dozens of suicide attempts, hospitalizations, self-mutilation and eating disorders. She killed herself when she was 45. Sadly, my sister's two children's lives have been heavily and adversely impacted by their mother's history of incest and the resulting mental health issues. I often wonder how things might have turned out differently if my sister had felt safe enough to tell her secret to a teacher in elementary school, or even in middle or high school.

As illustrated by my family's story, childhood sexual abuse has no economic or social boundaries. More than a third of female state prison inmates report sexual abuse as children, as do about 14 percent of male inmates. Even more alarming, sexual abuse was reported by 44% of the male prisoners and 87% of the female prisoners who spent significant time in foster care or in institutions as children.³

While serving as a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate, Guardian Ad Litem) volunteer for 18 years, I was privileged to represent dozens of children before the Montgomery County Juvenile Court. Sexual abuse was part of the story of many of the children I served, but I want to tell you about one in particular. I was appointed to advocate for Robert when he was 10 years old. By that time, he was living in his third foster home. Robert's story is one more tragic tale of how childhood sexual abuse can ruin a life if left undisclosed or untreated.

In short, Robert was sexually abused multiple times by multiple people, while he was with his birth family as well as while he was in the custody of an agency that was supposed to protect him. After experiencing unreported abuse earlier in his childhood, Robert came in contact with a pedophile that had been featured on America's Most Wanted television program and had skipped bail in New Jersey only to end up in Dayton. Robert first encountered this pedophile at the home of a family member, but the abuse continued even after he was removed from his family and placed in a foster home. While Robert bravely testified to the grand jury against his perpetrator, I am sure that if Robert had felt safe to disclose the earlier abuse by family members to a trusted

³"Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers" (NCJ-172879) BJS statistician Caroline Wolf Harlow, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/parip.pdf>. April 1999

teacher, he would have been better equipped to avoid further harm when he later came in contact with this ruthless pedophile.

My relationship with Robert continued after he was emancipated and “aged out” of the foster care system. Robert’s early childhood trauma led him down the path of addiction - which he told me helped him “forget the pain” of the trauma and abuse he had endured throughout his childhood. The last time I saw Robert was in April of this year at a residential drug treatment program, one that his probation officer had been able to get him into following a 3 month stay in the county jail. I had high hopes that he would finally be able to tackle his long history of sexual abuse with a trained therapist on a regular basis and hopefully find the ever elusive sobriety and happiness that he had been in search of for most of his life - and that he deserved. I learned that Robert had left the program the day after we spoke and became another statistic 4 weeks later. On May 24, 2017 he was found dead - a victim of a heroin and/or fentanyl overdose behind a carwash in North Dayton.

My family’s story and Robert’s story of childhood sexual abuse illustrates the need for Erin’s Law to be passed. Children need to be taught to tell a trusted teacher, school counselor, pastor or adult if they are being touched inappropriately by anyone - stranger, family friend or relative. Lives can be changed and indeed even saved, by teaching children the difference between a good touch and a bad touch and that it is OK to tell the secret to a teacher.

Finally, the CDC report I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony also notes that when children do disclose abuse, teachers are the most likely professional to be told.⁴ Erin’s Law would make that even more likely to happen.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we must continue to quickly push forward with the passage of this bill again with the hope that your friends and colleagues in the Senate will join you this time so that this legislation can be sent to the Governor for signing into law.

Let’s start changing the statistics by making Erin’s Law a reality for Ohio’s most vulnerable citizens - our children.

⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.